



IN PUGLIA, FROM THE HILL, MARTINA FRANCA OVERLOOKS THE VALLE D'ITRIA

MARTINA FRANCA

THE ELEGANCE OF THE BAROQUE

Martina Franca, a beautiful town rich in Baroque art, presents itself as a scenic network of lanes and alleys, flanked by remarkable noble palaces with stunning wrought iron balconies, splendid ancient churches and characteristic squares.

MARTINA FRANCA AND ITS HISTORY

Situated in the heart of the Valle d'Itria, in Puglia, Martina Franca dominates an immense area dotted with olive groves and vineyards. This beautiful town, together with Locorotondo and Cisterino, form such a perfect triangle, almost magical, such as to be considered sacred to the disciples of the divinity of Babaji.

In fact, in this area embellished with a large number of "trulli" that look like small temples, for many years have been present the Bhole baba Centre. Walking around the old town, even without a

planned itinerary or a destination, everywhere, after a turning a corner or strolling along a lane, you can easily see enchanting details of the urban architecture dating back to 1700, attractive elements of the Baroque art, either rich in unexpected elegance or genuinely simple, tastes of antique and modernity.

Entering the old centre through the ancient gates, you can admire the massive round towers and a few square towers just visible inside the town walls.

According to local historians, the origins of Marina Franca go back to the 10th century, when a small village was established by the refugees from Taranto, escaping from the continuous Saracen devastations, on Mount San Martino. Actually the legal foundation of the village dates back to 1300, when Philip of Anjou, Prince of Taranto, enlarged the village to favour the settlement of the population, granting them tax exemptions (franchigie).

From this historical event derives the town's name "Franca" while "Martina" was added in the honour of San Martino, Patron Saint of the French Cavalry. Walls with defensive towers were erected around the town; part of them have been preserved up to now, such as Porta Stracciata, Porta di S. Francesco, Porta del Carmine and the Arco di S. Stefano.

In the 15th century Martina Franca became an Aragonese fief and in the 16th century it was a duchy of the noble family Caracciolo from Naples that, in the second half of 1600, wanted the Palazzo Ducale (a work by Giovanni Adrea Carducci from Bergamo) to be built. It is a wonderful structure, reminding you of the style of the sumptuous Roman palaces, built on the site where, in ancient time, used to be the Castello degli Orsini.

In 1646 the population, led by a blacksmith called "Capo di Ferro", rebelled against the Duchy of the Caracciolo that, anyway, maintained its fief up to 1827.

MARTINA FRANCA: PALAZZO DUCALE

In Summertime the Palazzo Ducale hosts various events such as the renowned "Festival della Valle d'Itria" now in its 34th edition, that every year proposes some masterpieces of the rich Italian and European opera heritage; the "Festival del Cabaret", with unknown comedians aspiring to be awarded the prize; the "Girandola", a show with known and unknown artists playing in the streets and squares of the historical centre.

In Wintertime meetings and exhibitions take place as well, such as the events proposed by the Fondazione Paolo Grassi, the famous intellectual figure from Martina Franca, former President of the RAI and founder, together with Giorgio Strehler, of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano.

Expert people meet for studying the connections that music and theatre can have with other scientific, humanistic and social disciplines as well as with some important aspects of contemporary life.

MARTINA FRANCA THE BAROQUE ART

In 1700 the town became magnificent and prospered mostly thanks to the agricultural and breeding activities.

A splendid building of worship, the Basilica di San Martino, is universally recognized as one of the best and noteworthy example of the Baroque art at Martina Franca.

It stands in the graceful Piazza Plebiscito, dates back to the second half of the 18th century and is dedicated to the Patron Saint of the town.

It was built on the site of a former Romanesque church and realized in the typical Baroque style by the famous architect Giovanni Mariani from Milano, with a stylish façade and an interior worthy of admiration.

Remarkable is also the Church of San Domenico, erected between 1746 and 1750 on the site of a pre-existent Romanesque building (dedicated to Saint Peter), to a Friar Domenico Cantalupi's project. The church, in the elegant Baroque style, is divided into two sectors by double pilasters and perfected by capitals embellished with caryatids featuring the characteristic siren shape.

Another building for worship, whose origins go back to the 18th century, the Chiesa del Carmine rises outside the city walls. It was built between 1727 and 1758 in Baroque style and preserves a remarkable polychrome statue of the ancient Church of Santa Maria della Misericordia, ascribed to Stefano da Putignano.

ARTIGIANATO A MARTINA FRANCA

~~Passaggiando per il centro storico e dintorni sarà possibile fermarsi in qualche negozietto caratteristico ed acquistare oggetti dell'artigianato locale in ceramica, ferro battuto e preziosi ricami fatti a mano, e magari ammirare il maestro all'opera mentre con una pennellata da un tocco di colore ad un piatto e la merlettaia procede il suo paziente lavoro di ago e filo.~~

WROUGHT IRON

For sure wrought iron is amongst the craft activities that have mostly affected the aesthetic profile of the ancient hamlet.

Roundish balconies reminding you of Borromini's works and spirals decorating balustrades, almost imitating the art of embroidery, embellish the façades of each historical palace.

The alleyways themselves are still lit by wrought iron street lamps, enriched with twisted leaves. In the past, the work shops of wrought iron craftsmen were placed in single rooms; still now evidences of the origins of this activity can be found at Quartiere della Lama. Gratings, headboards, lamps, sconces, candlesticks, streetlights, railings, banisters, mirrors, table and desks of various shapes and sizes are crafted in the laboratories now as in the past.

Time passes but the tradition of wrought iron is still fascinating, thanks to the work of the craftsmen able to combine the originality of past art and modern production techniques.

EMBROIDERY

The wool, the linen and cotton thread, as well as the valuable silk were used for weaving blankets, sheets, tablecloths, towels, dresses and shirts. With the needle and thread or with a loom, women produced the linen for their own family while the most skilful weavers realized real masterpieces for the most prestigious families. Young girls used to prepare their own trousseaux in their early age, a habit that some attentive mothers still continue to maintain, setting aside the bridal linen and clothes for their daughters. Those who could afford it, used to have the trousseau embroidered and also enriched with a pillow laces patiently realized by the skilful hands of the local lace makers. Today Martina Franca can still boast skilful embroiderers and lace makers that, being respectful to traditions, carry on these activities in accordance with the art of past times.

TERRACOTTA, CERAMICS, MAJOLICA

In the past centuries Martina Franca developed a flourishing production of ceramics of such a good quality and far superior to that of the neighbouring countries, as to satisfy the needs of the wealthy local middle class: plates, fruit bowls, vases, stoups, jars that featured floral decorations and were enriched with vegetable-shoots, and also flowers, bunches of grapes and even light pods celebrating their shapes.

The craftsmen, besides realizing objects for wealthy clients, also used to create some typically popular objects, such as the capaseddha, the capasa, the capasunu where wine, olives, dried figs and cereals were preserved; the pignata and the thiedda for cooking broad beans and other delights of rural cuisine; then vases for flowers, plates, glasses and cups, decorated with simple rims and blue spots or with the typical cock on a clear background, with a red crest and a dense blue plumage.

This varied production of artefacts is still carried on, even if in smaller quantities compared with the past, and carefully handed down through the generations, recovering the transformation process of the clay into valuable and inimitable ceramics as the result of a unique creative moment of the artist.

Cuisine

The cuisine of Martina Franca is the result of the balance between the rural gastronomic traditions and the historical memories of the population, with olive oil and wine as fundamental ingredients of the art of cooking. The agro-industry is one of the most important sectors of the local economy and the typical local produce, from cheese to salami (especially the “capocollo”), wine, olive-oil and pasta, are renowned and appreciated worldwide thanks to their high quality and genuineness. Recently the Commune of Martina Franca has become a member of the Slow Food Association, aimed at showing off the typical produce of agriculture and foodstuffs. Always present in the Martina Franca's cuisine, the “fave battute” are accompanied by wild vegetables. Not to be missed is the so-called “fornello pronto” to be tasted at various specialized butchers' that offer you some mixed meat roasted in a wood-burning oven.

Getting to Martina Franca

By car: A14 Motorway, Bari exit. Then drive along S16 up to the cross with S172 and continue to Martina Franca.

By train: FS railway to Bari station, then Sud Est railway.

By plane: Bari or Brindisi Airport. Then by train.

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